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William Casey: America's fiery spy boss polishes the CIA's tarnished image

CIA DIRECTOR William Casey several years ago was looking to buy an elegant house in Washington that had already been promised to the Japanese Embassy. The owner wondered what she would say to the Japanese.

"Tell them to remember Pearl Harbor," huffed Casey. He didn't get the house.

That story says a good deal about the temper of the director of Central

Intelligence, the man in charge of finding out what the Russians are up to and sniffing out in advance terrorist incidents, such as the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in Lebanon.

He also runs the agency's "secret war" in support of anti-communist guerrillas in Nicaragua.

At age 72, Casey is aggressive and quick-witted. But he has a streak of arrogance and impulsiveness that often gets him into trouble with Congress (though not President Reagan) and has made him one of the most visible and controversial spymasters in years.

Casey and Reagan were not close before Reagan asked the politically astute New York tax lawyer (he had once run for Congress himself) to take over managing his faltering presidential campaign early in 1980.

After the victorious election, Casey actually wanted to be named secretary of state.

Reagan gave him his second choice, the CIA, and a special mission: Rebuilding the agency's image and morale after the embarrassing disclosures of "dirty tricks" during the Seventies.

He had the experience. At barely age 30, Casey was in charge of all U.S. espionage agents on the enemy-ruled continent of Europe during World War II.

At the beginning of the war, the young lawyer caught the eye of Gen. William (Wild Bill) Donovan, head of

the Office of Strategic Services (the espionage agency that later became the CIA).

Casey first served as an aide to Donovan at OSS Washington headquarters, as well as running the all-important London office, getting Allied agents into and out of Germany and the Nazi-occupied countries. Over

the past five years, Casey and Reagan, both septuagenarian Irishmen, have built a close relationship.

He is the first intelligence chief to be a member of the Cabinet and he has access to Reagan whenever he needs it, something most of his predecessors didn't have.

The President has so much confidence in his spy boss that Casey became the first CIA director in 16 years to be asked to stay on from one presidential term to the next.

He also is more influential on non-intelligence questions than any previous CIA director. Casey is part of the hard-line bloc that often opposes Secretary of State George Shultz and

usually is aligned with Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger.

And he is not only a political appointee, but an appointee who has not lost his taste for politics. Now and then, he will show up at Republican fund-raising events — sometimes even saying a few words.

That infuriates Democrats. Indeed, many members of Congress are not as enthusiastic about Casey as Reagan is. They charge that he always looks for ways to keep them in the dark about what the agency is doing, particularly in Central America.

But despite the bad feelings between the CIA director and Congress, Casey has been successful in getting big funding increases — as much as 50 percent higher than in President Jimmy Carter's last year in office.

Casey has used much of that money to beef up the agency's analysis branch.

That has not yet produced enough intelligence on Moslem extremists, such as those who hijacked TWA Flight 847. But Casey has built back CIA morale, in a low state of affairs after four years of Jimmy Carter's director, Admiral Stansfield Turner.

Casey combined street-smarts with an aggressive attitude to make an early fortune providing investment intelligence to business clients during the Depression following his graduation from Fordham Law School.

Although he shuns the TV appearances that Admiral Turner exulted in, Casey is fond of the Washington party circuit and loves to socialize with fellow conservatives. He has been married to his wife, Sophia, since 1941.

They live in a Virginia suburb not far from CIA headquarters in Langley, and have a grown daughter, Bernadette, whose privacy they respect.

In the wake of the TWA 847 hijacking, Bill Casey is being pressed to find out how the Mideast terrorists really function. That is perhaps the stiffest challenge of a career in intelligence that began in London over 40 years ago.



CIA boss William Casey talks spy business with his Commander-in-Chief, President Reagan.

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